

## ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE ON INDIGENOUS MEXICAN WOMEN

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### Abstract

Intimate Partner violence in indigenous populations has been little explored in Mexico, so the aim of this study was to explore the characteristics of violence that otomi women undergo in the State of Mexico. 50 women living in circumstances of intimate partner violence participated in the study and voluntarily agreed to take deep interviews. The ecological data analysis indicates the testimony of family violence during childhood, overcrowding, poverty and stereotypical and rigid gender roles as the main enhancers of violence against women in this community. The value of the ecological model was shown to recognize the social, familiar and individual characteristics that shape the generation and maintenance of partner violence in indigenous populations.

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**Keywords:** Women, indigenous, violence, ecological model

Nowadays, one of the most serious violations of women rights is violence against women by their intimate partners. Intimate Partner violence is a form of interpersonal violence and it is defined by the World Health Organization (2012) as "the behavior of the partner or former partner that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm including physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behavior"

On this regard, since the 90's, systematic research has been carried out in Mexico in the field of violence against women by their partners. However, there are significant knowledge gaps generated so far, among which the exploration of domestic violence in rural and indigenous communities is highlighted. There is evidence that there are certain regularities in the presence of the phenomenon in urban areas, but in rural areas and especially in indigenous communities, significant differences are envisioned (Valdez-Santiago, Gonzalez-Montes, Juarez-Ramirez and Terrazas-Mata, s/f ).

Based on the foregoing, the National Center for Gender Equity and Reproductive Health (2009), considered the ethno-linguistic element to differentiate indigenous women and thus clarify their reports of violence. In the sample under study, five percent were women who speak an indigenous language, of which 31% reported living with current partner violence, 44% intimate partner violence for life and 60% violence some time in their life. A specific analysis of violence against women in some indigenous groups was published in the Survey of Health and Rights of Indigenous Women (ENSADEMI 2008) conducted by the National Institute of Public Health (2008). This survey was administered to 3, 972 women in indigenous areas of 6 states. The overall prevalence was 25.55% of which 21.09% is psychological type, 10.06 is economic, 9.83% is physical, 6.12% is negligence and 6.75 is sexual. It is worth clarifying that the prevalence and severity varies considerably from region

to region because as you can see, indigenous women and their partners as a whole are not a homogeneous group and living in different sociodemographic and sociocultural realities, but they generally share poverty and social backwardness.

According to Gonzalez and Vizcarra (2006), from the total population in Mexico, 7.5% speak an indigenous language, the Otomí is spoken in the country by 358, 575 people, representing 4.9% of the total population speaking indigenous languages. Among Otomi speakers, 37% are residing in the State of Mexico and the sexual distribution marks a process of feminization. Thus, Otomi women become an important group to explore partner violence without ignoring specific aspects of each location in this ethnoregion.

It is recognized that intimate partner violence is a complex and multifaceted problem, with biographical, psychological, social and environmental roots, for which there is no simple explanation. Thus, it is particularly important to investigate the types and aspects of partner violence that Otomi women live, because, according to the sociocultural characteristics in which they live, they are most exposed to the risk factors listed in the Ecological Model Factors Related to Gender-Based Violence.

In the first level called “individual”, there are biopsychosocial factors underlying personal history. These characteristics of personal development that affect the response in the microsystem and mesosystem and increase the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence. Among the abovementioned items, there are characteristics such as age, gender, level of education, employment and income and exposure to violence in the family of origin. Regarding the latter, it is recognized that living in violent familiar environments, suffering or witnessing aggressions within the family may predispose people to suffer these types of events at some point in their lives (Olivares e Ichaustegui, 2009) . In this sense, the Otomi women from an early age witness violence by the father to the mother and even often suffer violence from their father in flesh, such violence is generally framed in the father's alcoholism .

In the second level called microsystem there is an immediate context in which violence occurs and generally refers to the current family environment. According to Heise (1998), violence occurs more easily in homes where men tend to exercise control over money and women's actions. In the Otomi communities, this previous situation is commonly encouraged by the mother in law, since in most cases, when couples decide to live together, they do so in their parents' house; through which they get the role of "watching" the wife's movements and expenses, and women even give them the power to violent reprimands. On this same level is substance use, especially alcohol, because as Lloret (2007) indicates, alcoholism may be a risk factor that favors the emergence of violence when combined with other macro-and micro-social determinants. At present it is estimated that alcoholism affects 70% of the Otomi population (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, 2008).

At the mesosocial level, we can locate community contexts where individuals and families as well as the relationships established in neighborhoods develop. The elements involved are urban decay, overcrowding, poverty and lack of educational development. In this aspect, the Otomi population is organized in small communities with little or no urban services. Regarding education, the average is 5 years, [number missing] of them do not attend school, the latter being more pronounced in the female population. Regarding overcrowding and poverty, they seem to be a constant in the Otomi women given the habit of married women who go to live in the groom's parents' house (no ability to inherit or receive dowry from their family of origin), pursuant to the rules of the patrilocal settlement system (González and Vizcarra, 2006). These family groups are organized to survive; however, the vast majority of the economically active population (86.66%) live with two or fewer minimum wages (\$ 8 per day). Men are usually engaged in street trading outside the place, so

their economic contribution is not secure, while the wife weaves or embroiders napkins in addition to their domestic work, breed animals and replace the man in farm work to secure family food (INEGI, 2011).

The last level or macro level deals with inserts in the social structure such as social representations, the use of power and impunity among others. Apparently, in violence against women, there is an immense network of values and powers that interlock to maintain the patriarchal structure that is maintained and reproduced through customs, tracking moral precepts besides the lack of rights (INEGI, 2011), since in the Otomi families, if the firstborn is male, his residence at home is ensured and he will take care of the parents when they reach old age. Most importantly, the family heritage remains in the same family, this patrilineal and patrilocal custom is claimed in a report based on the land rights system.

Moreover, the assignment of gender roles is based primarily on the importance of workforce to achieve subsistence existence and ethnic retention. So feminine and masculine identities are constructed, which are assigned symbols and meanings. In this sense, girls are not women until they take the roles assigned to reproduce the workforce, which is usually linked to the care of the family as the unit of production including the property of men. Meanwhile, children acquire the male identity at birth through their strength for farm work, but also as providers and guardians of the household (González y Vizcarra, 2006).

The above points toward the need to deepen the understanding of the aspects of intimate partner violence that indigenous women undergo. That is why the objective of this study was to describe its aspects.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

We worked with 50 women who accepted to be interviewed and who live in a violent relationship with their partner.

### *Technique*

Deep interview, which is a conversational tool that the researcher uses in order to understand the individual and their culture (Infante, 2002). The basis of analysis for this project are:

- Individual level: History of violence in the family of origin
- Microsystemic level: Development of intimate partner violence
- Mesosystemic level: Overcrowding and poverty
- Macrosystemic level: Social representations

### *Procedure*

Women were called individually and once they signed the letter of consent to be recorded, they proceeded to conduct deep interviews.

### *Analysis of results*

Data was analyzed through content analysis.

## **Results**

At the individual level, it was found that all women living in situations of partner violence had witnessed violence between parents and were even victims of violence by parents or a close relative during their childhood, as shown by the following lexias:

### *Witness of violence*

W24: "We were eating when I heard that my father began to insult my mom and he hit her and opened her forehead and we were listening to it, what I remember was the last time he got drunk".

W3: "My mom drinks, and also my dad, they argue and disrespect each other, and with rudeness, but we never saw any beating". W5: "I didn't like the way my parents got

along because they both drank a lot, that's why they had many conflicts". W7: "Well, my dad, ah, he got drunk more than anything, he drank and got there with my mom, he fought with her, hit her a lot, I was very little but it frightened me". W9: "I saw that my parents argued very often, I got to see hits only twice, my dad used to beat her".

#### *Violence victim*

W36: "My mom died when I was 9 or 10 years and I went to live with a brother who was already married and then his wife beat me a lot, I went to live with my other sister but also sent me to look after their animals and beat me, and then I told my other sister who was working, I told her to take me work with her, but she stole my money and beat me".

W45: "My mom hit me because I didn't lock up the chickens, she made me bleed and told me that he preferred a thousand times her animals over me, she would have preferred that I died instead of my twin brother".

W39: "My mom was very rude, I had the feeling she did not love me, she told my older brother not to help me, on the contrary, they got together to beat me".

#### *Kidnapping of women*

W14: "I didn't have a courtship, I was stolen, I came to town for the day of the dead, he said he would take me to work but I he took me to his house and his family and he would not let me out, and then the babies came and I stayed there".

W24: "He took me just like that, without me wanting to, let's say, as they say here, they rob you without your consent".

W36: "Once, he arrived drunk, grabbed me, took off my sweater and he wouldn't let me go, and although I screamed, no one would help me, he took me to his house, I did not want to leave, I said I don't love you and I don't know you, we had seen each other twice but night came and I was scared to go back to my sister".

#### *Violence at courtship*

W24: "He came and we were talking, maybe I said something that offended him or that made him beat me".

W9: "I wore soft makeup, but he said he didn't like it; and I loved him, so I stopped wearing makeup".

#### *The man's family as instigator or aggressor*

W24: "Once my husband beat me, my sisters in law were there and one of them got involved to support him, I told her not to get involved, because she didn't know what the problem was about, so my father in law started to yell at me as if I were the cause of everything".

W36: "My mother in law scolded me a lot, she was very cruel to me".

W2: "And then my mother in law supports her son, tells him that I shouldn't ask for too many things, that I spend a lot of money, that I only buy candy".

#### *Intimate Partner violence*

Psychological violence: W24: "He has a gun and several times threatened me with it, aiming at my chest or my head, he tells me he'll kill me if I intend to leave him". W36: "He always told me I was worthless, insignificant, and he kicked me out of the house". W1: "The problem is he threatens me with taking away my son".

Economic violence: W24: "Once he hit me really bad, I was bleeding all over, I went home to my parents, and the next day they were out and he came looking for me, and beat me out of the house". W36: "When he goes to work, he brings his money and sometimes gives me 100 pesos, but he pays beers for his friends, and when he doesn't have money, he asks for the money I earn from working". W39: "Since we live together, he's never bought me anything to wear". W1: "I always tell him, hey support me with this, the kid needs it, and he said he didn't have money".

Negligence: W14: “When the children were born, he wasn’t there, I stayed with his parents and they didn’t want me to go to the doctor, I had to give birth to two of my children at home”. W36: “At 7 months pregnant, I told my mother in law that my back really hurt, she told me that I deserved it and she ignored me, I had to borrow money to go to the doctor but still lost my baby”. W39: “He accompanied me when I got sick, he didn’t cure me, he didn’t come for me or took care of me”.

Sexual violence W36: “He treated me like a thing he used and I said no, because it hurts, and on the contrary, he enjoyed it much more”. M9: “When I told him I was pregnant of our third child, he told me he didn’t want my stuff”. W49: “He obliged me to have sex because it was my duty, if I didn’t satisfy him, he got another woman”.

Physical violence: W14: “I don’t know what happened, once he hit my tooth, then the next time he hit my foot, but it didn’t hurt so much because he was wearing socks”. W36: “I lost a baby when I was seven months pregnant because of his beating”. W45: “He yelled at me, shoved me, hit me, even beat me a lot, he was very aggressive”. W39: “He hit me for the first time, because I had brought a sewing machine my dad had given me with the money I had earned working before, from that moment on, he started to get drunk on a daily basis and he didn’t work any more, then he hit me and yelled at me”.

A mesosystem level, it was found that levels of overcrowding in housing and poverty is an enhancer of intimate partner violence, as can be seen in the following lexias:

#### *Overcrowding*

W17: “My husband and my three children have been living with my parents in law and two sisters in law for nine years now”. W2: “When we got together we went to live with my parents in law, also my brother in law and his wife and children, and we, as they didn’t have a special room for kitchen, the food was made in the same room and we cooperated with expenses and therefore sometimes I put more money and my husband scolded me because I spent money”. W3: “We went to his house but we had a lot of trouble, because parents in law and sisters in law usually get involved. One day my brother in law and his wife came, and then the children, then she said she was beaten and that they stole her things, since we were like this in a room and there was no other division, just a curtain, my mother in law believed her and argued with me”.

#### *Poverty*

W1: “Sometimes I saw he went to Toluca for a month and he told me here you have 200 pesos, and I said go away with your 200 pesos, and he said buy milk and diapers for the child, and see if that’s enough, he said no, that is what I can give you”. W2: “it may be that I endure that and I do not buy anything, but not my kids, teachers ask them for materials or things like that and, well, as we have the opportunity, sometimes I don’t have anything, well, he helps me then, so I thank him for this support, he has solved our economic problems and then no, I do not tell him that even the most necessary and basic things, like now the malnutrition issue due to lack of partner support, sometimes he gives you 20 or 15 pesos and you can’t do anything”. W7: “He goes to Mexico for selling, to Querétaro, sometimes he does good, sometimes he doesn’t; so we carry on, but we’ll never have money”. “I weave napkins, cross stitch, but just to get out of trouble as they pay 180 for a dozen and it takes two weeks”.

At macrosystem level, social representations that deal with the rights and roles of women and legitimizing the use of violence by men were found, as shown in the following lexias:

Women’s rights W8: “At the beginning, my parents didn’t want to send me to school because I was a woman and I was getting married, but then I went to primary school only”.

Role of women W23: “Now that my mother in law came to live with us, well, she started again with her ideas about me not working, I hadn’t raised animals before and all that,

but it was her suggestion that women must raise animals and plant land”. W28: “My mother in law then tells me, well, she says you must do everything she says, she says he is my son”. W33: “I tell him, well, if your mom told you to beat me and treat me like that, and that, and once he confessed that it was true, so I would obey him”. W39: “My mom told me when I went to live together, she didn’t want arguments, that I had the obligation of being good to my husband, that if my husband scolded me, I shouldn’t answer, or look at him or scold him back”.

Legitimization of violence: W2: “Well, because my family tells me why do you break up, if you wanted to live with him, well, you have to hold on, because I was decided to break up with him”.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Qualitative data indicate that being a woman in the Otomi village involves sharing a history, a physical-social, space, experiences and expertise that, by being imbued with social representations, reproduce the dominant patriarchal order where the valuation of the genre sets procreation, submission, and obedience as constituent elements of womanhood. An example of this can be seen in the individual level analysis which highlights the fact that all women currently living partner violence, witnessed violence between parents or were victims of domestic violence. According to Heise (1998) these experiences are not required to live further violence, since it is still unclear the mechanism of experiencing and / or witnessing violence in childhood and suffer violence in adulthood. Despite this fact, there is evidence that these individual factors modulate the relationship with potential abusers and may impact the likelihood that the person is re-victimized (Grauerholz, 2000, Flood y Fergus, 2008).

An element shared by the individual level and the micro-element is that violence is practiced against the children or to the couple, most often performed under the influences of alcohol. Regarding this matter, Lloret (1998) indicates that alcoholism may be a risk factor that promotes violence when combined with other microsystemic and macrosystemic elements.

According to Heise (1998), male decision making, is an indicator of violence, for male abusers tend to exercise control over money and women's actions. An example of this in the present study, is also a micro level which is the immediate context in which violence occurs and is usually the family.

Given the importance the Otomi give to the fact that the couple has to agree to live together (Gallardo, 2010), it is particularly relevant finding that three women were stolen without their consent and in two cases without knowing the raptor, who later became their husband. Another interesting aspect is that even though in the Otomi culture there is no courtship as it is known in our culture, in the few cases where the couple manages to be or go out alone, there is evidence of psychological partner violence, mainly in the form of control of women’s personal grooming.

Courtship in this population is made hiding from the parents, so the couple has little time to get along; when the couple agrees on "joining", one night they go to the groom’s parents’ house. In subsequent days, the groom's parents visit the bride's family to warn them that she is already part of their family and also deliver a welcome package with beer, cigarettes, fruit and liquor as a way to formalize the union of the youngsters. In this regard, the results of this study are consistent with findings by Molinar (1997) in the sense that when the new couple is formed, they usually move in with the groom's family whereby women is incorporated to housework, which until then was responsibility of the mother and sisters in law. This step is particularly difficult for women because they are usually recipients of violence from mother and sisters in law, by not properly fulfilling housework (preparing corn, making tortillas and food, laundry and keeping the house clean). Likewise, parental

household tends to incite man to exercise corrective action usually violently towards his wife when they consider she is not doing her duty.

The women in this sample are often exposed to different types of violence. Within the psychological violence, which is the most prevalent, the recurring themes are restricting women's actions, criticizing their dress and physical appearance, and the threat of taking away the children in the event that the wife leaves or demands the husband. The humiliations and threats are typical of this type of violence forms, but the restriction of movement of women is particularly relevant as it connects with an element of the macrosystem which like a social representation indicates what may or may not make a woman in this culture. Married women can not leave without the permission of their husbands, if he is absent which is very common given the itinerant nature of his job, they should stay home and should not receive visitors. They don't have the same freedoms as men and their behavior is constantly monitored mainly by the husband's family as they live in the same home or at least on the same site (Gallardo, 2010).

Economic violence is strongly associated with an element of the mesosystem which is poverty and social representations encompassed in the macrosystem. Among the Otomi, there is a sexual division of labor where the greatest burden falls on women in a context where she should be devoted to the home and the man to his merchant activity. The women, in addition to biological reproduction, are responsible for the survival and welfare of the family so their workday goes through household chores, work in the field and embroidered napkins to sell. Thus, the economic contribution to the household is done unevenly, the man just enters part of the proceeds as he assumes no responsibility for financially supporting the family, however it is considered "head of household" what it means to have power over his wife and children. In contrast, women fully occupy their income for household expenditure, although its share is socially devalued because it is considered as simple "help" (Molinar, 1997).

Regarding negligence as a form of violence, we should consider the following facts: men forbidding women to seek medical help when they are sick, men not taking themselves to get help or forcing them to do housework while being sick. Due to the concept of disease held in the community, the construct of neglect is difficult to measure, because for them being sick is when their lives are seriously endangered and they have to go to a clinic to be hospitalized (Gallardo, 2010). Consistent with this, we found that many of the women reported that when they had been hospitalized for various reasons, their partners had not been with them or had not been held responsible for the costs, the latter falling in the women's family.

Sexual violence is manifested in the form of pressure to engage in sexual intercourse against the will of the woman on the grounds that if she does not, he has the right to find another woman to satisfy him. This shows the will of man to control women's sexuality and reassert his authority as a husband (INEGI, 2011).

Finally, Otomi women reported physical violence, although in all its forms it is potentially dangerous in this population can be considered a low hazard since there are no weapons or severe beatings. It is noteworthy that in national surveys physical violence appears second, while prevalence in this population is presented last. Regarding ENDIREH 2011 (INEGI, 2011), it is explained that although among indigenous-speaking women there is already a higher perceived incidence of violence, not even episodes that they considered normal for agreeing with some values, beliefs and declare customs that "naturalize" such violence.

At mesosystem level, overcrowding and poverty are included as triggers of violence. As mentioned above, traditionally the family unit was formed around the parental home as a single line inherits the land and all the male children have the right of usufruct of the crop. This, combined with the custom of the newly formed couples living, on average, five years in

his father's house, which consists of up to three bedrooms and home to three generations, brings overcrowding. Overcrowding is linked to the lack of suitable space in dwellings or the little privacy that limit the possibilities of harmonious coexistence among household members (National Institute of Women, 2006).

As for poverty, we have documented that people of Otomi living with four dollars or less (INEGI, 2011), which is complemented by the sale of embroidered napkins and collecting quelites, fungi and fruits wild by women. In this regard, Moreno (1999) reports that there are studies reporting the existence of a direct relationship between poverty and violence in the family, because of the stress conditions that occurs in the absence of basic goods.

Finally, at macro-level, we find the cultural values and social representations of gender that permeate society (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) which influence the mesosystem and the microsystem (Grauerholz, 2000). The theory of Social Representations framed building social imaginary about women, relationships and even violence in it. An example of this can be seen in the present data, which indicate that being a woman in this Otomi community marks a path already laid out for them characterized by the lack of educational opportunities, rigid and stereotyped roles that frame the way act and especially the obligation to stay with your partner if you live in violence. Regarding the latter it is clear that women are not supported and are persuaded by their families to continue their relationship since separating from her partner is socially considered "returned" with which breaks with the representation of submissive and obedient woman, also returning to the family home becomes a threat and rivalry for land inheritance (Molinar, 1997).

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